Charles Tonderai Mudede

Black Mirror Body

The night after Donald Trump won a long and ugly US presidential race, Alain Badiou entered a classroom at the University of California, Los Angeles, sat down, placed some notes on the table, and then explained that he had decided not to give his planned lecture, "Concerning Violence." Instead, the most prominent French philosopher of our day would talk about Trump and what his success revealed about our current political, historical, and economic condition.

The resulting lecture, which ran for just over fifty-five minutes, had this statement at its center:

> We can define our moment as the moment of the primitive conviction of liberalism as dominant in the form that private property and the free market compose the unique possible destiny of human beings. And it's also a *definition* of a human subject. What is, in this *vision*, a human subject? A human subject is a beggar, a consumer, an owner, or nothing at all. That is the strict definition today of what is a human being. [italics added]

Badiou told his students on the day after the US presidential election that to be a human in the Trump era was to be "a beggar, a consumer, an owner, or nothing at all." Does this mean that, under Obama, we were something else? And under Bush II? Were we something other than what we were under Clinton and Bush I? What was the human under Reagan? Jimmy Carter?

Perhaps we should not be surprised that for Badiou, that old Maoist, the state of the human situation is defined by the leader of the dominant society. The function of the leaders of other societies surrounding it, near and far, would then be to receive and impose this state/definition/ideology on their subjects, or to reject it, loudly. In either case, dominance is dominance, from the US to Zimbabwe: you are a beggar, or a consumer, or an owner. Or you can be nothing.

Because before there is the *definition* of the human as human – the leading subject of Western philosophy – there must also be a human as animal – the leading subject of sociobiology. There is the thing that changes (the human), and the thing that persists (the animal). This distinction is necessary because we know that the animal, whatever it is, is deeper and older and, because of its genetic burden, cannot change so rapidly, certainly not at the furious pace of presidential elections. Yet what we examine, theorize, categorize when we examine, theorize, categorize the human is just this ever shifting definition, and what is left unsaid, and is almost unknown, is the animal, which, by default

A close-up of Caesar, the leader of the rebel apes in the reboot of the *Planet of the Apes* film series. In a departure from ape anatomy, the CGI team gave Caesar human-like eyes to make him more expressive and to enhance the audience's ability to empathize with him.

in this understanding, becomes nothing more than a substance on which this ceaselessly alternating definition of the human is impressed. The animal is the raw matter on which the various historical definitions of the human work. But is this substance just that, a substance? Is the human as animal mere putty? A horse can also be an animal (indeed it is an animal first and a horse second) but a human can only be a human, or different types of humans.

Here is something to consider. The man Trump has picked for secretary of state has a view of the human that is similar to Badiou's: the malleable animal. In 2012, Rex Tillerson, ExxonMobil's CEO, admitted to the Council on Foreign Relations that climate change is a real thing (or, to use the language of Timothy Morton, a "hyperobject"[1]) and caused by human activities – particularly the burning of fossil fuels (Tillerson's bread and butter). But this situation was not really a problem, according to his way of thinking the thing (the hyperobject), because we, as humans, can easily adapt to changing environments. Humans live in the desert, the Arctic Circle, the jungle, you name it. You can be a San, an Eskimo, a Yanomami. Whatever the earth offers, we can take it. "As human beings, as a – as a – as a species," Tillerson said,

> We have spent our entire existence adapting, okay? So we will adapt to this. Changes to weather patterns that move crop production areas around – we'll adapt to that. It's an engineering problem, and it has engineering solutions. And so I don't – the fear factor that people want to throw out there to say we just have to stop this, I do not accept.

The human changes not only in accordance with changes in the US presidency, but also with changes in the natural environment. An animal like the horse, however, is, according to this view of life and the world, chained entirely to its genes. It and the body are one. And so, when something dramatically changes around the horse, the horse is doomed to stubbornness, and doomed by its stubbornness. It goes on and on as is, as if nothing is happening. But the human and the body are not chained, and so the human can be many different types of humans in respect to different situations. And somehow the body has no say in this.[2] The "plasticity" of the human – to borrow Catherine Malabou's term – is unlimited by its fleshly extension.

In this view of things, the human as animal is basically putty, and putty is basically nothing. In both Badiou and Tillerson, we find this animal that, despite having organs, is radically empty. Indeed, Marx, the leading social philosopher of the nineteenth century, even describes the human as the animal whose body is instinctless.[3] The dam a beaver makes or a hive a bee helps to build is in (and also is) its body. The body tells the animal what to do. And the animal does exactly as it is told. But the human has a body that is mute. It says nothing, demands nothing, insists on nothing. Like the best slave, the body simply waits and receives and is obedient to the human that passes through it in a form that is consistent with a current natural or social configuration. It provides no instructions for anything. The nineteenth-century American philosopher and psychologist William James proposed that the human is the animal that does not have instincts in its body but puts them there through learning and experience. An example of this is the instinct for riding a bicycle. It is learned. It becomes a part of the body. And so what separates us from, say, a horse is that its instincts are there from beginning to end, whereas ours are accumulated through experience and learning and, as a consequence, can be unlearned by the same process. We can build a house not by listening to and following the commands of the body but from a concept of a house. And because this concept is not locked in the body, it can be not only adjusted but also judged. The bee has no idea if the hive it helps make is ugly or beautiful. It just is. Humans, on the other hand, are the art animal because concepts – or more specifically, culture – is our species-being. We are *Homo culturus,* that species whose instincts extend outside the limits of what is genetically pre-given in our brains.

But in fact, the human body is not blank or silent. It has lots and lots of things to say. The R&B singer R. Kelly once sang about hearing the body calling ("It's unbelievable how your body's calling … I can just hear it callin' callin'"). He was right. The human body talks. It has a call. But what is it? R. Kelly would have us believe that it is: fuck me. But the human body does not say this all of the time, and to everybody it meets. The human is not *the* fucking animal. Indeed, all animals are fucking animals. Of the five kingdoms of life on this planet – Monera, Protista, Fungi, Plantae, and Animalia – only Monera and Protista are non-fucking. Even plants fuck, albeit from a distance usually, or with the aid of a companion species. The knowledge that's gained from learning that a beaver fucks now and then is very small. Birds do it, bees do it, fleas do it, and so on. But to learn that, say, a beaver makes dams is of enormous importance. And a beaver's body – its flat tail, its big teeth, its slick fur – is a collection of tools that announces the kind of animal it is in every situation: I am a builder of dams. Now, what does

Romalea guttata grasshoppers mating. The female (below) is laying eggs, with the male in attendance. Photo: Wikimedia commons.

the human body say in every situation to all other human bodies?

I propose that the human body always says this: make me equal to you.[4] We are the equality-demanding animal. Confronted with our own kind, we insist on being recognized as equal. Resist this demand and instability will follow. Equality is a force. Remove this demand, and it becomes impossible to account for any and all of our definitive characteristics: language, cooperation, and above all, morality.

With morality, we find the root of our form of sociality. For other social animals, this root is very different. Human morality, the cement of human sociality, is not a command from the gods or a god, but from the body. And what the body says is: when I'm not the same as you, make me the same as you. This is where we become as stubborn as a horse.

The human body is built for equality in much the same way a horse is built to run fast or a cow is built to chew grass. For example, there is a sharp and unusual contrast between the human iris (which can be black, or brown, or blue, or what have you) and the sclera (which is always white). This is not an accident. It has an important function, which gamblers are very familiar with. It makes us more transparent. Human eyes provide information to other humans about what a human individual sees. If the eyes of a person who one is looking at move to the left, one becomes aware that something unseen is happening in that direction. The other person's eyes become our eyes. And similarly, our eyes can become their eyes. With another human, we have eyes behind our head. This is known as the cooperative eye hypothesis.[5] The distinction of the iris enables us to communicate with just our eyes. Other apes do not use their eyes in this way. Their eyes are very uncooperative, which makes sense because they are not as social as we are, or at least not social in the same way. This is not lost, by the way, on those professionals of human identification who build our mass entertainments. For example, it is why Caesar, the leader of the rebel apes in the reboot of the *Planet of the Apes* film series, connects with us so powerfully. His creators made him more human than chimp by making his sclera white. Take the whites of the eyes away, and he looks less intelligent and expressive. Caesar's eyes are not for the apes in the film, but for us in the dark theater, his human audience. We want to know what he is seeing and thinking and feeling.

The whole history of the human body can be seen as a reduction of physical inequalities. At the level of the individual (Hegel's particularity), this is a journey toward a more and more helpless condition (the actual universality that Hegel misinterpreted as the unfolding of mind or spirit). This is called "paedomorphosis," or "gracilization." It has not made us only smaller and weaker but has also diminished big physical differences between men and women. The physical differences between, for example, a male and female gorilla are enormous. And evidence shows that similarly extreme sexual dimorphism existed between proto-human males and females. But the size of the sexes was equalized through the years by what appears to be the pressures of our form of sociality. Why? Because the weaker humans are, the stronger their social bonds. Gorillas could never obtain our level of sociality because their males are much too strong and independent. All they need is a family (a few females, kids), not a group, a tribe, a community.

This has not prevented thinkers – often male – from dreaming of gorilla life. For evolutionary anthropologists like Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, the fact that "modern humans are much less robust than earlier hominid species" is seen as a consequence of the growing human dependency not on other humans, but on technology, which makes us soft. They even believe that hunting with "projectile weapons" had something to do with it.[6] Western anthropology confesses its weakness in these moments: it loves hunting and meat too much. Even to this day, the literature is filled with stories about how we became social because we needed to coordinate hunting, or we learned to share because meat is so precious and so rare and everyone loved it, or our brains expanded because of increased access to the protein of big game, and so on. But a new school of anthropologists – often female (Kristen Hawkes, to name one) – have begun telling another story, which is backed by strong evidence. For them, meat played a much smaller role than gathering in the early period of modern humans. In fact, hunting was a huge waste of resources, providing more thrills than calories.

In definitions of the human which emphasize freedom rather than equality – be they anthropological, philosophical or otherwise – one finds more longing than longitude, more fantasy than falsifiability, more desire than description.

The human is helpless without other humans. That is the nature of its body. And if we fail to recognize the depth and extent of this dependency, we will not see the source and function of human social learning. The human body forces us to learn from the experiences of other human bodies because its guiding impulse is to increase and intensify cooperation. Anything that gets in the way of learning (sharp teeth, claws, big muscles) is shed by the body.

In the fifth episode of season three of *Black Mirror*, the solder Koinange, played by actor Malachi Kirby, begins to see the humanity of his enemies due to a faliure in his reality-altering implant.

The human body is not empty, it is radically open for the reception and transmission of experiences that are not its own. The experiences of a rabbit, for example, are mostly locked in its body. A rabbit cannot learn much from another rabbit, especially if it is a stranger. As a consequence, the culture of rabbits is very limited. And this brings us to the question of culture. What is it? The accumulation of human experiences across time and space. And it is only when a culture is not open to all bodies that an ideology appears, is shaped, is transmitted.

The function of culture, as social memory, is to enhance the kind of body we have, the body of equality. Ideology is what happens when the culture that springs from and functions to serve the moral human body is captured by the few, and this capture needs justification. This is politics. This is why an egalitarian society needs little or no politics or ideology. The human, oddly enough, is not the political animal (that honor goes first to the chimpanzee; the human is the moral animal[7]).

If we look at the leading ideology of our day – the one described by Badiou as comprising the figures of beggar, owner, consumer – it stands at a very great distance from the body that demands equality with other bodies. (An ideology can be either close to or far away from the moral body. The ideology of social democracy is, for example, closer to this kind of body than, say, neoclassical economics.) The dominant definition now says: no one is equal at all. You are either a beggar, a consumer, an owner, or nothing. Stranger yet, neoliberalism, the ruling ideology between 1979 and 2008, went so far as to say that there was no society. From the mouth of the late Margaret Thatcher, the UK's prime minister between 1979 and 1990: "There's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families." Here is an ideology fit for a gorilla!

And so, human ideology not only changes a lot, but it says things that not only fail to assist but also actively attack the thing it is supposed to represent and serve – the human body – which always says: help me, make me equal to you, we must do this thing together. Ideology in this respect is a kind of autoimmune disease, or social cancer, wherein a normal, healthy, and necessary function – the culture function – goes haywire, and threatens the body with extinction.

This is where we find ourselves today: There are two things at work in the human. One is its definition, which changes; and the other is its demand for equality, which was formed over hundreds of thousands of years, and, as far as human time is concerned, is eternal.[8] And in Badiou's statement about the definition of the human in the age of Trump, we find two things. One, the beggar is at the bottom of our ideology, which means that the subject who most represents the body and speaks its language has been dishonored and banished to the streets. The owner is praised, the beggar despised. And yet it is to the beggar that we owe the enormous and even otherworldly powers of the sociality from which the owners (the strong) benefit the most. Without the demand to *make me your equal*, which is essentially begging, we would be no better, socially speaking, than beavers. The beggars on our streets are indeed princes and princesses in rags. And we, the consumers, have been so transformed by capitalist ideology that we can't recognize their glory.

Badiou also reveals that the definition of the human is not only changing; with each change it also intensifies its assault on the body and its demands. From Gary Becker, to Margaret Thatcher, to Paul Ryan, we are seeing more and more extreme configurations of the ideology of ownership. In fact, this progression and intensification was the subject of an episode, "Men Against Fire," of the science fiction TV show *Black Mirror*. Concerning American soldiers operating in a Northern European country for a military corporation, "Men Against Fire" envisions a future where standard forms of disseminating definitions are not enough. To achieve the best and most efficient results from soldiers – and by implication, from human subjects – the ideology is implanted in the body.

What happens is this: In the process of enlistment, soldiers are required to agree to an implant that alters their reality (it's called "MASS"). They are also informed that they will have no memory of this implant, which, it turns out, transforms the soldier's enemies into zombie-like creatures called "roaches." Because the soldier cannot identify the enemies as humans, he/she can kill them without a thought. One day, the implant of one of the soldiers, Koinange (Malachi Kirby), is damaged by one of the roaches, and he sees the truth (the zombies are actually humans). Then he begins to do what humans, somatically, are made to do: offer help (equalize) other humans. A soldier in his unit, stunned by Koinange's sudden concern for the roaches, beats the living daylights out of him and takes him back to the base. He is put in a cell and is informed about the implant and made to watch a video of himself agreeing, during enlistment, to the removal of his memory of the implant. When he refuses to have his regained awareness of the implant erased, Koinange is told that his body will have to live with the real rather than altered (video-game-like) memories of the women, men, and children he killed when he thought they were zombies. This is what hell really is. And because the human body cannot live with such pain – the

pain of its others, the pain of not helping but hurting that which it recognizes as itself, the human body – he agrees to have the memory of the implant erased.

What "Men Against Fire" wants us to see is that the body of the beggar is still a problem to the leading ideology of the time, which privileges the owner. The human animal is still there. It still has the audacity to make its demands. It's still as stubborn as a horse. But how did we end up in this twisted situation, one where ideology no longer represents the body but is entirely at war with it?[9] The body of cooperation removes and represses the strong. This story constitutes the deep history of the modern human. But the story of the strong, of might makes right, of Rex Tillerson, is very recent. It constructed the world we see around us – a society that polices the beggar and protects the owner.[10]

×

Charles Tonderai Mudede is a Zimbabwean-born cultural critic, urbanist, filmmaker, and writer. Mudede collaborated with the director Robinson Devor on two films, *Police Beat* and *Zoo*, both of which premiered at Sundance – *Zoo* was screened at Cannes. Mudede is also the film editor for *The Stranger*, a Seattle weekly.

1
A passage in Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) recently led to my discovery of Ramin Bahrani's masterpiece *Plastic Bag* (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stqyjxRmW30), a short film that features a narration by what has to be Germany's greatest contribution to the resources of the English language, Werner Herzog and his distinct voice and style. As a work of philosophy, I rate *Hyperobjects* as second in importance only to Spinoza's *Ethics*. In the way the former de-anthropomorphized God, the latter de-anthropomorphized nature. There is no longer an inside and outside. There is no nothingness into which we can dump waste. The atmosphere turns out not to be a very good sewer. Everything we do is connected into local systems and also into hyperobjects, like global warming. Hyperobjects are not infinite but temporarily and spatially massive. The plastic bag in Bahrani's short film, a plastic bag that reminds me of the many floating and swirling plastic bags on the streets of New York City, realizes this, that it has the temporality of a hyperobject, and so longs for a smaller and more human scale. "If I could meet my maker," says the bag, thinking that it was made by the woman who uses it to carry her groceries, "I would tell her just one thing: I wish she had created me, so I could die."

2
In Western philosophy, Spinoza is the only thinker who saw the human as human the same as the human as animal.

3
Karl Marx: "A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no mere momentary act." *Capital, Vol. 1*

4
I discuss this in "The Equalizer," the second essay in my ongoing essay series entitled "The Inhabitants." See "The Equalizer," *e-flux journal* 70 (February 2016) http://www.e-flux.com/journa l/70/60573/the-equalizer/. The present essay is the third in the series.

5
See Ker Than, "Why Eyes Are So Alluring," *Live Science*, November 7, 2006 http://www.livescience.com/4299-eyes-alluring.html.

6
Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, *Not By Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

7
This line of argument – chimpanzee as political animal – was first presented in "The Equalizer."

8
In truth, the body does change, but very slowly.

9
A small part of the answer can be found in the first essay in this series, "Neoliberalism and the New Afro-Pessimism," which concerns communal killing and the policing of bullies. See "Neoliberalism and the New Afro-Pessimism: Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Hyènes*," *e-flux journal* 67 (November 2015) http://www.e-flux.com/journa l/67/60719/neoliberalism-and -the-new-afro-pessimism-djib ril-diop-mambty-s-hynes/.

10
The next essay in this series will look at how the mechanism that keeps the strong in check and the weak in power – gossip – was replaced by a system that justifies competition, inequality, and the rude law of the strong, politics.